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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the complexities of the question as to whether or not American Sign Language (ASL) is a foreign language. It reviews the historical oppression of the deaf, the development of ASL and its defining value to proponents of deaf culture, mentions other language systems (including foreign sign systems) used by the deaf--specifically comparing ASL and English, posits arguments for considering ASL a foreign language, and examines what having a hearing student learning ASL as a second language might gain and lose by selecting ASL over a traditional language like German. It is concluded that for native American English speakers, ASL is not a foreign language. However, it is argued that it should be able to be counted as one for the purposes of educational requirements, even if it is likewise concluded that the learner of a traditional language like German or Italian gets a far higher payback. (Contains 16 references.) (KFT)

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# Is American Sign Language a "Foreign" Language?

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**Preface.** About ten years ago, as foreign language department chair in a four-year state university, I came under considerable pressure to add American Sign Language (ASL) to our traditional offerings. This pressure came through office visits by advocates of ASL, articles in the student newspaper, and a constant stream of requests by "impartial" students who wanted to interview me for research papers. Although aware of the politically-charged nature of the issue and of great student interest in ASL courses, I took a more "enlightened" and "principled" stand and resisted the pressure. As a result, ASL courses were introduced in the communications department, and the foreign language department waived university foreign language requirements for students who met the legal description of hearing impaired.

However, in 1994, Utah joined the ranks of private institutions and state educational systems that mainstream ASL. The legislature mandated that state institutions offer ASL courses which would meet foreign language requirements (Senate Bill No. 42, 1994 General Session). Since then, ASL has been housed in the foreign language department. Existing ASL courses have been re-numbered to correspond to first- and second-year foreign language courses, and students now learn functional skills in ASL through a proficiency-based program.

These developments still beg the question of whether or not ASL is a foreign language. If it is not, should it meet foreign language requirements? This article explores some of the complexities in what appears to be a simple question. It refers to the historical oppression of the deaf, reviews the development of American Sign Language and its defining value to proponents of deaf culture, mentions other language systems used by the deaf--specifically comparing ASL and English, posits the arguments for ASL as a foreign language, and, finally, examines what a hearing student learning ASL as a second language might gain and lose by selecting ASL over a traditional language like German.

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**Being deaf.** The mind relies on receiving sensory perceptions to interpret and understand the outside world. Sight is the most highly developed human sense, but hearing is more essential in establishing contact with fellow humans. Although general contact is possible through the tactile senses, mind-to-mind contact is possible only through a system of symbols which, for most humans, consists of sound symbols. The sounds used, and the order in which they are presented, are completely arbitrary. To be understood, patterns of sound must have consistent meaning in the context in which they are uttered.

A child is not born with a language, but every child is born with an innate intelligence that allows it to learn any of the ca. 3,000 languages currently being spoken on earth (Stross 1-3). The mind recognizes that family members emit predictable sound patterns during the performance of repeated tasks. Children learn a spoken language by replicating the sounds associated with the action, and they are rewarded by family members when the utterance matches the situation.

Although a deaf child born into a hearing family recognizes facial expressions and gestures accompanying human behavior and possesses a mind capable of categorizing sensory perceptions, that child cannot possibly learn a language system based on sound. Nor can the mind of a deaf child replicate sounds it cannot hear, even if the vocal tract is healthy and functioning. In the United States, one child in a thousand is born deaf (Dolnick 46) and "only five to 10 percent of Deaf children have Deaf parents" (Shelly and Schneck 21). Put another way, fully 90 to 95 percent of all deaf children are born into hearing families. Moreover, fewer than 10 percent of these children are able to perceive enough sound to enable them some chance of learning to speak a language (Dolnick 39).

Historically, deaf children were thought to be mentally retarded and were subject to humiliation and mistreatment.Trapped in a world of silence, they were often hidden away or placed in mental institutions. However, the capacity for language, i.e., the ability to communicate through a system of visual symbols, was demonstrated whenever deaf people came into contact with each other. This natural sign language

created by the deaf is unrelated to signed languages created by hearing people for special circumstances.[1]

**American Sign Language and Deaf Culture.** As early as 1500, an Italian doctor found that the deaf could be taught to associate written words with objects. Juan Pablo Bonet of Spain published a book ca. 1620 on simplifying the alphabet and teaching "Mutes to Speak." In the late 1750's or early 1760's, a young French priest, Charles Michel de l'Epée, was concerned about the spiritual salvation of the deaf and founded a school for deaf children. Aware that they communicated through signs, he became a champion for sign language, despite criticism by his contemporaries. In the late 1770's, the first public school for the deaf was founded in Germany. Samuel Heinicke, the school's founder, disagreed with his French contemporary and taught his students to speech read and speak German (Shelly and Schneck 19-24). His work marked the beginning of the debate, continuing today, on whether deaf children should learn a manual language or be taught oral skills to facilitate integration with the speaking community.

ASL originated after Thomas Hopkin Gallaudet returned from an educational sojourn in France with an experienced teacher of the deaf, Laurent Clerc. Together they founded the first U. S. "permanent school for Deaf students" in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817 (Shelly and Schneck 24). For the next fifty years or so (1817-1867), Clerc taught his manual method to teachers from deaf schools throughout the country. The method spread, and new signs continued to be added. "In 1867 every American school for the deaf taught in ASL; by 1907 not a single one did" (Dolnick 50).

This abrupt change in methodology can be attributed to the well-intentioned efforts of influential educators like Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe. They discovered while traveling in Germany that German deaf students could understand and speak German, while American deaf students had no oral skills in English. Howe founded a school for the deaf using the oral method in the late 1860's. When Alexander Graham Bell became a strong advocate for the oral method, it sounded the death knell for teaching the deaf in a language that was natural for them (Shelly and Schneck 25-26). In an attempt to force deaf children to learn oral English skills, the use of sign was

forbidden in the classroom. However, the majority of children could not successfully learn oral skills and continued to communicate with each other through sign. Communication through signs not only survived the classroom ban, but it continued in use through the 1970's when "total communication" began to be accepted in schools for the death, and manual systems that more closely followed English spoken forms were invented and taught (Shelly and Schneck 260). Among the deaf, these invented manual languages were considered "refined" (Eastman 10) while their natural language (ASL) was considered a "low language" (Eastman 25).

In 1960, a hearing professor of English at Gallaudet, William C. Stokoe, published the first linguistic study of ASL (Cokely and Baker xv). He apparently was the first scholar to use the term ASL during a five-month stay in England studying how British sign language "differs from and is similar to **American sign language**" [emphasis added] (Eastman 21). Stokoe's linguistic studies in ASL led to a gradual introduction of ASL in the classroom at Gallaudet, first as a graduate course on its structure in 1970 (Cokely and Baker xvi), then as an undergraduate course for credit in 1978, and finally recognition of ASL in 1979 "as a viable means of communication which may be used in classes" (Cokely and Baker xix).

Recognition and study of the language by the professionals who taught deaf students were the first steps to deaf "pride." Just as blackness became a source of pride and identity in the civil rights movement, ASL, the natural language of deaf Americans, became a source of pride for the deaf. Public awareness of the "movement" came in 1988, when Gallaudet College students revolted at the appointment of Elisabeth Anne Zinser, "the only hearing person of the final three candidates" as president of Gallaudet (Shelly and Schneck 37). Under the focus of national media attention, students and faculty successfully opposed the appointment.

Even today, universal support of ASL does not exist. The overwhelming majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents who desire to assimilate them into their world. However, because most deaf children cannot develop sufficient oral skills in English to make this assimilation possible, an inevitable conflict occurs as to which

language is in the best interests of the children. Deaf "extremists" claim that hearing parents are unfit to raise deaf children, primarily because they are unable to communicate with them in their natural language (ASL). They view attempts to assimilate deaf children into the hearing world of their parents and siblings--whether through language, main-streaming in schools, or medical procedures enabling them to hear--as further proof that hearing humans consider deaf humans inferior, in need of "fixing" (Dolnick 37-53). A view of "deafness" as a sort of "ethnicity" is reflected in publications where "Deaf" is capitalized like other proper adjectives denoting nationality. More moderate deaf leaders encourage hearing parents of deaf children to study the issues in order to understand better problems of the deaf (Dolnick 51). Some scholars believe that avid support for ASL as the natural language of the deaf, as an affirmation of their humanness, and as a refuge from the isolation they experience in the hearing community, has led to a Balkanization of the deaf community. Deaf children of deaf parents who sign ASL enjoy the high end of social prestige in the orthodoxy of deafness. Those who have learned speech and try to assimilate into the hearing culture are called "oral," and those deaf who believe that ASL is not the best language for the deaf to learn are labeled as "think-hearing" (Wilcox and Wilcox 65). Although no official records exist, ASL appears to be the primary language of a large percentage of the deaf in the United States and Canada. The Wilcoxes quote one report estimating that there were 550,000 people in 1994 whose hearing loss was severe enough to preclude hearing speech. A second report estimates the number of fluent speakers of ASL in 1987 at "between 100,000 and 500,000" (Wilcox and Wilcox 13). Not all deaf people use ASL as their primary language. To help their children assimilate into the dominant culture, hearing parents often elect alternative signed systems more closely related to English.

**Other language systems used by the deaf.**

Finger spelling. Signs exist for each letter of the English alphabet and for numbers. Use of this signed alphabet does not constitute a signed language. It would be as unnatural and as tedious for the deaf to spell each word as it would be for anyone else. An

experienced finger speller needs about twice as long to spell a word as to speak it. However, finger spelling is employed in all signed systems (including ASL) for those words for which there is no sign (Shelly and Schneck 10).

Signing Exact English. SEE was developed in 1972 by a deaf woman who had deaf parents and a deaf child. This system consists of a sign-for-word translation of English, follows English word order, and also has signs for prefixes and suffixes. It was the favored sign system in deaf schools until most recently (Shelly and Schneck 260).

Signed English. Developed in 1973 at Gallaudet University, this system contains "3,500 sign words and 15 sign markers" and uses English word order. It is less complex and comprehensive than Signing Exact English (Shelly and Schneck 260). Pidgin Sign English. Pidgin Sign English occurs naturally when hearing learners of ASL use English syntax in their signing order. Even expert ASL interpreters are forced to employ Pidgin Sign English because it is almost impossible to keep the interpreting pace and still put ASL in its accustomed sign order (Shelly and Schneck 9).

*Oral systems used by the deaf* include: speech (lip) reading, cued speech, and speech.

Speech (Lip) Reading. To help deaf students decipher what people are saying, they are taught to watch the mouth to see what sounds are being produced. Unfortunately, only about 25% of sounds are produced where they can be seen, and only half of them can be distinguished from other sounds produced in the same positions (Shelly and Schneck 10). Studies in England have shown that deaf signers with ten years of training are no more accurate in lip reading than a typical person on the street. In simple sentences, only three or four words out of ten can be guessed (Dolnick 39-40).

Cued Speech. This method "was developed in 1966 by Doctor Orin Cornett" (Shelly and Schneck 10). Using "eight hand shapes in different positions near the mouth," the speaker can remove the ambiguities in speech reading. The observer knows from the hand shapes, for example, that the speaker is saying "bat" rather than "pan." Within twenty hours, hearing parents of deaf children can learn the hand cues accompanying the English that they are speaking (Dolnick 48). Hand cues performed in conjunction with the spoken words supply enough visual information for a deaf child to learn the

English language word for word. Many deaf people oppose the use of the hands for gestures that do not "convey some kind of visual meaning." For them cued English is "nonsense use of the hands" (Padden 96). Speech. Most deaf people cannot learn to articulate English speech sounds well enough to be understood by the general public. Success at speech is dependent upon how profound the hearing loss is (Dolnick 47-48).

Foreign Sign Systems. Visual-gestural languages can be found in all parts of the world. Like spoken languages, they are not mutually intelligible. Countries that have a national sign language include: "Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Spain, and Sweden" (Shelly and Schneck 11).

**ASL and English.** From the beginning of time, humans have used facial expressions, body posture, and visual gestures to convey meaning. One does not need to know a person's language to sense when he or she is nervous, frightened, happy, sad, surprised, etc. In the absence of language, it is natural to use gestures to communicate.[2] Some gestures are universal; others are culturally determined. For example, in some cultures approval is signed by shaking the head up and down, in others by shaking the head from side to side. In English, of course, shaking the head from side to side signifies disapproval or negation, and touching or tapping the temple with one finger may mean that a person knows something. The latter sign in German means the person is not thinking properly.

Because the birth of a deaf child to hearing parents is an entirely natural occurrence, it would be highly unlikely and unnatural for that child to create a visual language having no relationship to the culture and language of the parents. And it is to be expected that the written form of the parents' language will be reflected in the signed language as well. These expectations are born out in the comparison of ASL to English. The head shake to signify negation and approval, and the sign for mental acuity are expressed visually by ASL signers in the same way as English speakers do. Showing contempt by raising the middle finger is shared by ASL signers and English speakers as well.

> Gestural communication, often called *kinesics*, also has its analogue to language. That is, in some societies or social groupings within societies communication takes place through a gesture language. American sign language [sic], for example, is a language for the deaf. It utilizes a vocabulary of gestural signs which combine in rule-governed ways to form gestural sentences.
>
> Possessing a vocabulary and syntax, a gesture language can be considered coordinate with, rather than necessarily subordinate to, a language proper. It performs similar functions, slightly differently expressed (Stross 13).

This view does not imply that ASL is English "slightly differently expressed." Like English, ASL employs facial expression and visual gestures. Whereas these elements are ancillary to meaning in English, they are essential components in ASL. Unlike some of the sign systems discussed earlier, ASL is not a form of signed English. In lieu of sounds, signed languages use hand, arm, and body positions and movements, the shape of the hand, the position of the palm, and the location of the sign to provide meaning (Shelly and Schneck 52). Eye blinks in ASL signal conditional clauses, and the end of any clause. A "yes/no" question is indicated by leaning forward and raising the eyebrows, a "who/what/when/why/where/or how" question is signaled by leaning forward, furrowing the eye brows and sometimes hunching the shoulders and tilting the head. Time is indicated by body position, and directional verbs with movement in the indicated direction. When a hearing person performs the gestures without appropriate facial expressions and body posture, his or her signing is virtually incomprehensible to a deaf person (Shelly and Schneck 60-63, 241). Signing ASL without the proper facial expressions and body movements corresponds to a foreign language student's applying English pronunciation and intonation to French, thus making it nearly incomprehensible to a Frenchman.

Beyond kinesics there are other cultural ties to English. Signs classified as iconic (or natural) imitate actions. Some examples are "toothbrush" which is indicated by moving the index finger up and down on the front teeth; "zipper," signed by doing a zipper movement from the stomach to the chin; "baseball," by making the motion of holding a baseball bat (Shelly and Schneck 72-73). A sign language developed by the deaf in the Amazon jungle would have no iconic signs for "baseball," "toothbrush," or "zipper" since those items would not be part of the standard culture.

Because English has a written form, it is not surprising to find influences from written English in ASL. Indeed, initialized signs in ASL reflect linguistic ties to English. "Initialized signs are those in which the hand shape, used to form the sign, is the shape of the first letter of the corresponding English word" (Shelly and Schneck 73); " . . . the signs for 'family,' 'team,' 'group,' 'class,' 'department,'and 'organization'" . . . each share the exact "locations, movements, and palm orientations" (Shelly and Schneck 74), but the hand shape for each sign has the form of the signed alphabet letter that begins the English word.

Daily human needs can be maintained with either a *spoken* or a *signed* language. However, a *written* language is necessary to preserve specialized areas of knowledge beyond the memory of normal human intelligence. Modern culture and civilization is so complex that no one person can master all fields of knowledge. Written language makes it possible not only to transcend time and space but also to create a repository of creative language genius in poetry and prose, a treasury of thoughtful insights that attempt to explain human existence through mythology, religion and philosophy, or a storehouse of scientific knowledge and technology. Each advance in civilization is possible because humans do not have to re-think individual contributions in knowledge already recorded in written language.

Linguists have created scripts for ASL using symbols to represent the four elements of each sign. (Wilcox and Wilcox 27). To be successful, written symbols should describe location, hand shape, position of the palm, movement, and facial expression with enough precision to avoid ambiguity, without taking too much written space. Since the

symbols represent visual shapes and movements, they can not be used to represent the hundreds of thousands of English words for which there are no signs. In addition, if sign script were practical and the deaf community were to replace written English with it, it would take away the one visual language link that is currently universal among all literate English speakers and ASL signers. As matters now stand, no script has been adopted, and all ASL signers have to become literate in English or some other spoken language in order to communicate with their family and friends over teletypewriters (TTY's) or by mail.

Written texts are visual symbols of the spoken language and, as such, are accessible to the deaf. However, a hearing person can more easily associate written symbols with the sound symbols of a spoken language than an ASL signer can relate a visual sign to sounds he or she cannot hear. A signer has to learn to read and write symbols of a language that is foreign. Typically, a "sixteen-year-old" deaf student reads at the "eight-year-old" level of a hearing student. Seventy-five percent of deaf students leaving school cannot read a newspaper, and only two percent of deaf students attend university, compared to forty percent of the general population (Dolnick 40).

The difference between how words are formed in signed and spoken languages is significant because it determines the size of the vocabulary. The twenty-six letters used in the English alphabet appear in different combinations to create symbolic representations of the 44 phonemes that could be used alone or arranged in different orders to represent words (Der Duden, 6: 107-08). Mathematically, those phonemes could be used alone or combined in various ways to create an infinite number of words. ASL signs are formed from four components; they must be formed in finite space, i.e., near the signer's face, and must be visually distinguishable from each other.

English possesses the largest vocabulary of any language in the world (over 1,000,000 words) and new words from foreign languages, science, and technology are constantly being added (Berlitz 311). Standard dictionaries represent only a fraction of the total vocabulary in a language. The latest *Webster's College Dictionary* contains over 163,000

entries, the German dictionary *Wahrig deutsches Wörterbuch* contains 250,000 entries, and the latest edition of *Webster's American Sign Language Dictionary* contains 5,600 entries. According to frequency word counts in French, German, and English, the 4,000 most frequently used words comprise "95% of the vocabulary of all normal texts and dialogues" (Oehler 3). Despite the size of English vocabulary, educated speakers use and recognize 25,000 to 50,000 words, but use only approximately 3,000 words in daily conversation (Berlitz 137-38). The 5,600 signs in the ASL dictionary are sufficient to discuss most situations occurring on a daily basis. They would not be sufficient to sign the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* which contains on average 25,000 words. (Berlitz 137). That a relatively small number of signs exists may be because there are a finite number of signs possible. Or, it may be a reflection that not enough deaf are in positions in society requiring more specialized vocabulary. It may also reflect the fact that ASL does not support an extensive culture and civilization with art forms, sciences, and technologies dependent on specialized vocabulary.

**Is ASL a foreign language?** The case for ASL as a foreign language may be succinctly stated. Following is a selective, simplified summary taken from *Learning to See: Teaching American Sign Language as a Second Language, 2nd Ed.*, a text written by Sherman and Phyllis Perrin Wilcox, linguists at the University of New Mexico and respected advocates of ASL. They argue on the basis of language, culture, and literature.

Some Aspects of the Language Argument. ASL is a sophisticated language distinct from English, with visual equivalents of phonology (*cheremes*), morphology, syntax, and grammar. ASL is distinct from other signed languages and has a separate history, with influences from French Sign Language (20-45).

Some Aspects of the Culture Argument. Signers of ASL do not share just a disability to hear, they share a common language and a common code of conduct and values among themselves. They view their world and the world of the hearing from a perspective that is polar to that of a hearing person. Social behavior that is appropriate in the hearing world is often rude and unacceptable in the signing world. Critical components of Deaf culture that distinguish it from the hearing culture include: hearing loss; social life

centered in the Deaf community; a hierarchy of power; use of, and support for, ASL as the primary language; and an attitude that cherishes and values Deafness (55-69).

Some Aspects of the Literature Argument. Literature of the Deaf correlates primarily to oral literature in spoken languages, i.e., it is performed rather than read. Its primary genres are 1) oratory; 2) folklore (jokes, anecdotes, riddles, and ABC stories); 3) poetry, plays, and interpretive commentary of ASL authors; 4) videotaped autobiographies and interviews; and 5) literary works by and about deaf people written in English.

If the purpose of foreign language requirements in public schools and universities is to encourage students to learn a second language and culture that is foreign to them, then ASL meets that need as well as French, German, or Spanish. Or does it?

**German or ASL as a second language for a hearing student?** Both ASL and German give the student an opportunity to compare English to a different language. All learning is predicated upon the opportunity to be exposed to something new and to note how it is similar to, and different from, what is already familiar.

A hearing student of ASL learns how deaf Americans communicate using visual symbols. He or she notes which gestures and facial expressions are related to those used by speakers in American culture, which symbols are visual imitations of familiar cultural behaviors (iconic signs), and which symbols are used to convey abstract thought. The student learns how they combine to produce a passionate, complex language, where the signer becomes vulnerable through the highly emotional, personal nature of a language that must be signed face to face.

The student of German learns how hearing Germans communicate using a repertoire of sounds, some of which are similar to sounds used in English. The arbitrariness of sound differences in the two languages is echoed in the written symbols (e.g., the alphabet letter "i" though present in both languages represents different sounds). This student learns that ideas are expressed differently, i.e., Germans are not just representing the same concept using different sounds.[3] All nouns in German are capitalized and given grammatical markings that signify whether they are subjects or one of three possible objects. That many Americans have not learned the concept "noun" even though they

have memorized that a "noun signifies a person, place, or thing" becomes clear when they do not know which German words to capitalize. Similarly, many do not know what subjects and objects are, what subject-verb agreement, and subject-pronoun agreement are, etc. In short, hearing persons learning a second spoken language as adults accumulate a conscious understanding of how spoken languages function. As a result, many foreign language students comment that they finally are beginning to understand English.

The question thus becomes whether learning ASL provides the hearing student the same information about his native language that learning a second spoken language does. Having the opportunity to compare a visual language to a spoken language is certainly beneficial, but the experience is not the same. The English-speaking student who learns ASL instead of German (Spanish, French, etc.) cannot compare the relationship of sound and graphic symbols (spoken and written language forms) in the foreign language to his native tongue.

The same distinctions also can be made about culture and literature. It is often said that the deaf and the hearing inhabit different worlds, a silent and a hearing one. It is further said that having heard sound, a hearing person can never know the silent world of the deaf. While the deaf may inhabit a world that hearing people can not fully comprehend, ASL signers and their hearing relatives inhabit the same country. They live in the U. S.; they are subject to the same laws and customs; they share the same history, philosophies and religions; they see the same movies and TV programs and read the same newspapers and magazines as the general public. They live in the same culture, but participate in it differently, not just because they are a minority, but because they are a deaf minority. An American hearing student learning ASL well enough to allow communication with deaf Americans may gain a much better understanding of how the deaf react and make adjustments to the hearing world. That student also may achieve better insights into how hearing Americans react to deaf Americans in the culture. However, unlike the deaf, the student has the option of entering the hearing world at will.

By contrast, a student learning German stays in the hearing world. Germans do not experience the world differently from Americans solely because their language gives them a different perception. Their educational philosophies and practices are different; social and political history is very different, particularly the concepts of church and state. The government, though democratic and protective of human rights, defines those rights differently and assumes a different role. Moreover, Germans enjoy a culture and civilization that is every bit as complex and dependent on specialists to maintain as American culture. An American specialist who uses a specialized vocabulary in English and who speaks German can compare how the German specialist has clothed his thoughts in the German language.

Thus, the question of culture for a hearing student of ASL is whether the student learns a foreign culture or learns how deaf Americans cope in the American culture. I believe that an English-speaking student learning ASL learns how deaf Americans cope in the American cultural setting. Yes, the deaf cope in a different way than Navahos in Arizona, or Jews in New York City, but I would argue that all are different manifestations of the diverse American culture.

Differences in Literature (ASL vs. German). During the folk migrations in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, Germanic tribes came into contact with Greek and Roman civilizations. The Visigoths were converted to Christianity, and their bishop Wulfila (311-382/3? AD) used the Greek alphabet to translate the Bible into his language. This is the earliest written form of a Germanic language extant today (Braune and Ebbinghaus 2-3). The warlike Germanic tribes had an oral tradition about their heroes and gods, clothed in formalized meter and alliterative rime. Forms of this literature were first captured in writing in the 8th Century AD (Anderson and Williams 291). Since then, Germanic literary tradition captures major shifts in the languages; the assimilation of Classical, Christian and Germanic philosophies and values; and the development of society from family clans and tribes through agrarian feudal alliances, then through the development of cities and later the industrial, nuclear, and information ages. Along the way the student of German literature experiences, through the magic of written language,

human values and conflicts in every conceivable time, setting, and manner.[4] Of course, beginning foreign language students do not have sufficient language skills to access the vast reservoir of knowledge contained in a second language. However, continued study provides access to every art and science produced by that culture in the past, as well as all its current manifestations.

In comparison, ASL originated as a standard language with the founding of Gallaudet's and Clerk's school in 1817 and grew during the subsequent fifty years when the deaf and teachers of the deaf were united in teaching a manual language, using shared methodologies and signs. During the period when manual language was in disfavor, deaf schools did not promote literary activity. Indeed, it was not until 1973 when Gilbert Eastman created a play called "Sign Me Alice" (Eastman 28-29) that a more formal literary genre was conceived and performed in ASL. Compared to centuries of poetic literary creation in the spoken/written languages, ASL has enjoyed only some 30 years as an approved standard language of the deaf, and the number of ASL signers is extremely small. World-class literature has occurred only rarely from the spoken/written languages, and it would be highly unusual for a literary genius to have emerged from ASL during its short existence, particularly given its relatively small population base.

However, humans are story tellers, and the deaf are no exception. At the heart of every story lies a conflict, and it would be hard to conceive of a natural situation that offers more possibility for conflict than when parents and children can not communicate fully. Deaf children must often choose between parents who want them to be part of their hearing world, and peers who have an awakened sense of pride in their silent world. No doubt a world-class literary figure will emerge from that conflict-ridden situation--even though the resulting creative works will have to be translated into a written language for the world to access them.

**Conclusions.** This article began with a rhetorical question and a preface, both literary devices that inform the reader of the writer's intent and also invite the reader to participate in the discussion. In this article, the capitalization of "Deaf" as a sign of

ethnicity occurs only in quotes from sources that champion this viewpoint. I do not share this belief, and that is a primary reason why I do not believe that ASL is a foreign language. From a linguistic standpoint, there is no question that ASL is a complex, natural human language that is worthy of study. It is at least as difficult for non-native speakers to learn well as any of the spoken languages that we designate as foreign. If ASL is not like traditional foreign languages, should it meet foreign language requirements? I believe the answer to be a qualified "yes."

If the deaf had a silent country to match their silent world; if they lived in a distinct geographical location separate and apart from hearing humans; if this deaf country had it own form of government, law enforcement, sciences, architecture, mythology, religions, etc.; if the hearing had no deaf children, and if the deaf had no hearing children, then the question of whether or not ASL is a foreign language could be answered in simple black and white terms.

I do not believe that the study of ASL serves most English-speaking Americans as well as the study of a more traditional spoken and written foreign language. In the initial difficult years of acquiring a second language, study of ASL does not give the learner information about spoken and written languages that increases understanding of English. After acquiring the rudiments of the language and beginning the process of mastery, the differences are even more striking. A learner of Italian, for example, can travel to Italy, visit historic sites, participate in its great music tradition, study any field of human endeavor at an Italian university, or read about it in books, etc.. The learner of ASL can not participate in any of those kinds of activities.

The most limiting aspect of ASL is the finite nature of visual language. Because facial expression is essential for understanding, signs must be formed near the face, and each sign is further limited by how far the hand can reach, hand shape, position of the palm, and movements, all of which must be visually distinguishable. Though linguists have devised scripts describing those characteristics, the scripts have proven to be difficult to interpret, and they could not be used to describe the hundreds of thousands of specialized words for which there are no signs.

This limitation of ASL makes it impossible for it to comply fully with some of the goals in the national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, as noted below in bold. ASL fails to meet Communication Standard 1.2: "Students understand and interpret **written** and spoken language on a variety of topics" and Communication Standard 1.3: "Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or **readers** on a variety of topics." ASL also fails to meet the Connections Standard 3.1: "Students reinforce and further their knowledge of **other disciplines** through the foreign language." Whether ASL fully meets the other *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, particularly in the area of culture, is subject to interpretation.

Nevertheless, I believe that ASL should be offered through foreign language or ESL programs because the process of language acquisition is similar, whether the language is visual or spoken. Just as there are legitimate reasons for selecting a particular spoken language as a second language over another, there are compelling reasons to select ASL over a spoken language--such as an individual with a close deaf relative. Because children gain hand dexterity before they can control the vocal tract, ASL has allowed mankind to learn more about how children learn. The same can be said about primates who lack a sophisticated vocal tract that would allow them to communicate using a spoken language. Like the study of any second language, students are attracted to ASL for the intellectual stimulation, its aesthetic qualities, and the snob appeal of communicating with others who know the code in front of those who do not.

Because English-speaking learners of ASL do not have to learn to speak or write it, some foreign language teachers believe that students may elect to study ASL to meet foreign language requirements because they think it is easier than learning a second spoken/written language. These fears are somewhat born out by statistics in Utah. In 1994, the state legislature mandated that ASL would meet state institutional foreign language requirements and directed the public schools and universities to offer instruction in ASL. Comparing Utah's public school foreign language enrollments in 1994 to those in 1998 provides the following statistics (Patterson UFLE):

| **1994** | **1998** | **Percent** |
|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total FL | 81,622 | 76,031 | 93% (7% decrease) |
| ASL | 847 | 2,691 | 318% (218% increase) |
| French | 15,965 | 14,006 | 88% (12% decrease) |
| German | 11,347 | 9,366 | 83% (17% decrease) |
| Spanish | 51,143 | 46,821 | 92% (8% decrease) |

Those statistics do not tell the entire story. ASL is offered in 20 high schools, French in 64 high schools, German in 60, Spanish in 89. In five of the high schools where ASL, French, and German are offered, ASL more than doubles the combined enrollment of French and German (Patterson FLESHS). Those students who selected ASL over French, German, or Spanish did not do so because of family origins; they did not do so because there are more opportunities to use ASL than French, German, or Spanish (there is a large population of Hispanic first generation Americans in Utah, and a huge influx of German and French tourists visiting Utah's scenic national parks).

No one has conducted a study in Utah as to why students, if given an opportunity to choose, select ASL over French or German. It is clear that studies should be done as to why students are selecting particular languages. We in the language profession should not let such fears divide us. Studies in ASL above all else remind us how important language is in defining who we are as humans. Taken as a whole, the American educational system does not place as high a value on second language acquisition as do other systems in the world. We language educators need to do a better job extolling the importance of second language acquisition. We need to make intelligent decisions about which languages best meet the circumstances of different people. This task requires people of good will to work together for the common good.

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Endnotes

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[1]The plains Indians in North America used signed language to communicate simple needs with someone from another tribe whose language they did not understand. Trappist monks under a vow of silence employed signs to communicate needs with each other ("sign language").

[2]My six-month old grandchild explicitly indicated to me that she wanted to explore a particular spot in the room by twisting her body and pointing to that spot, regardless of where I carried her in the room. In a similar fashion, my father who had lost the power to use spoken language while nearing death successfully gestured that he wanted his head cooled and was thirsty.

[3]For example, the noun for "airplane" in German is "*Flugzeug*." "*Flug*" is equivalent to "flight" and "*zeug*" comes from a verb meaning to produce. Germans conceive of an airplane as a flight producer, whereas the English word refers to the convex upper surface of the wing, i.e., its "plane," which when powered generates enough speed to create a vacuum allowing something heavier than air to rise into the air.

[4]I have used German as an example because English-speaking Americans would catagorize it as a "foreign language," and because as a teacher of German, I am well familiar with it. Any other language with a long literary tradition would also serve as a point of comparison